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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
5/31/2009, Pentecost Sunday
Also Confirmation Sunday
Romans 8:22-27

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My sermon this morning is a homily on our Epistle Lesson, from Romans Chapter 8.

Before I turn to that, let me set the stage a bit by mentioning that not only is today the high festival of Pentecost, but also it is Confirmation Sunday for this year's two lovely Confirmands, Lilas Randrianarivony and Amanda Schulze.

Now, Amanda, as many of you know, is the granddaughter of my great predecessor here at Immanuel, Pastor Raymond Schulze. It turns out that Ray cannot be present for Amanda's Confirmation for the very important reason that he is scheduled for surgery to replace the batteries in his heart pacemaker. It's a routine procedure, but a necessary one as you can understand.

So, since Ray cannot be here, I feel I can tell you a delightful story about him, without embarrassing him. It's a story and it's a line concerning Pastor Schulze and our dear sister in the Lord Davida Goldman. It goes back many-a-year now, to when Davida was new to the church and was preparing to be baptized.

As Davida tells the story, she felt too intimidated by Pastor Schulze to ask him to prepare her for baptism, and so she asked the Assistant Pastor, Leonard Klein, to prepare her. To Carol and me, this is hard to imagine, since Leonard Klein is one of the most intimidating people we have ever met. We have known him since seminary days and love him with all our hearts, but still, we rather fear him, or rather, fear disappointing him. But Davida shied away, not so much from Leonard as from Raymond. And she told me a wonderful saying about that. She said that she was intimidated by Ray because he seemed so *holy* to her. What a wonderful summation of a life! She once mentioned this to Ray who laughed and answered, "I'm not holy. I'm skinny!"

And skinny he is too! But also, there is a kind of holiness about Ray because of his deep immersion in the Word of God.

The reason I mention this story is that the whole category of "holiness of life" is my theme now as I speak to our Confirmands. I want to say to them what I want also to say to each of us, that holiness of life is both proper for Christians and possible for us. We are *capable* of holiness. We are capable of a goodness that stuns the world - aye, and draws the world, helps fetch the world

to Christ. The Holy Spirit makes it possible for us. That's why we celebrate Pentecost Sunday.

So, let's turn to Romans 8. My beginning text is from our Epistle Lesson, from Romans 8. St. Paul writes this:

²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but *we ourselves*, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, *groan inwardly* while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:22-23, NRS)

In the *New Jerusalem Bible*, which is one of my favorite Bible translations, the heading for the Eighth Chapter of Romans is this: "The Christian's Spiritual Life." And this does indeed seem to be a good summary of that magnificent chapter. Christians often find themselves drawn to Romans 8, in the same way sensitive souls are often drawn to Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* or Michelangelo's *Pieta*. We are dealing with a pinnacle, with Mt. Kilimanjaro towering over the African plain, when we ponder Romans 8.

For example, I can hardly bring myself to do a funeral without including this chapter's hymn to God's love:

³⁸For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, ³⁹Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39, KJV)

Those are the last two verses of the chapter.

Let me lift up too the *first* verse of Romans 8, for in a way, the entire chapter can be thought of as a meditation on this opening verse. It goes this way:

¹There is therefore now *no condemnation* for those who are *in Christ Jesus*. (Romans 8:1, RSV)

"No condemnation!" Imagine that! What a sweet thought. No condemnation! Let this world's critics and judges and teachers and even our own conscience simply go away, out of the door! There is *no condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus. Morning by morning, we are free to start again, fresh in spirit, setting out on our path of daily repentance. If we were poets, and if we permitted our minds and imaginations to be filled with this thought - no condemnation! - and if we had God's grace in some measure as Paul had, then we might be led to rejoice in some of the same themes we find in Romans 8.

For one thing, we would be led to speak of “life”, for that is the great counterpoint to “no condemnation.” Indeed, we would speak of unconquerable life -- the kind of life that neither heights nor depths nor anything else in all creation could disrupt.

But also, I think we would be led to speak of longing, for our souls would set flight heavenward, the rightful destiny of those who are in Christ and so suffer no condemnation. Yes, we would long for heaven and its good and pure ways, and we would sorrow over the contrast between heaven and this present world. We would sorrow not only for ourselves, but also for our loved ones, for our neighbors, and for all humanity who lives now in a world terribly rendered and fragmented by sin and pride.

That’s where this morning’s language about “groaning” come from. Indeed, St. Paul imagines all of creation groaning along with us as we wait for our “adoption, the redemption of our bodies.” That’s a Biblical way of describing creation, to personify it. And so, the Psalms speak of nature as clapping, skipping, and singing:

⁸Let the floods clap their hands: let the hills be joyful together. (Psalm 98:8, KJV)

⁵The voice of the LORD breaketh the cedars; yea, the LORD breaketh the cedars of Lebanon. ⁶He maketh them also to skip like a calf; (Psalm 29:5-6, KJV)

As if in sympathy for humanity and for itself, all creation “groaneth.” The floods and the hills and the cedars have a kind of wisdom about them, knowing that this world is not yet as it should be and longing for that world to come in which there is everlasting joy and no more sorrow:

¹¹Therefore the redeemed of the LORD shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy shall be upon their head: they shall obtain gladness and joy; and sorrow and mourning shall flee away. (Isaiah 51:11, KJV)

So, there are two of the themes: life and longing.

Now, let’s turn to the main theme of this sermon, the theme I want to lift up for our Confirmands, the theme of holiness of life.

Martin Luther used to say that the great adventure of Christian life is that we should be what he called “little Christs” in this world. When we wake up in the morning and wipe the sleep from our eyes, our goal for the day is that we should present Christ to the world through our own lives. We should be little

Christ in life, in our schools, in our vocations, in our city, in our dealings with our neighbors. Among the many good things we have to do each day, this should be among them: that the world should have a living encounter with Jesus because it is lucky enough that day to have a living encounter with you and with me, who bear his name. The people of this world should have some sense of Jesus, some feel for his ways and his character, because it has some sense of us!

Naturally, there must be humility in such a manner of life. Luther gets at that with his adjective “little.” We are not Christ. We are not that good, that innocent, that loving. And yet, we are to be “little” Christ’s, who in some measure reflect him to the world. And so, in some true and honest measure, we are to be good and innocent and loving, following his example.

Yes, we should seek to be Christlike. You and I should aim *that* high: that we should so live that others will be put in mind of Jesus himself.

And my theme on this Confirmation Sunday, Lilas, Amanda, and each of us, is that we are *capable* of this. Never doubt this. Never let anyone take this away from you: your right and your ability to be a little Christ in this world. We might think ourselves too small, both in importance and in heart, to be Christ in this world. But the Holy Spirit will help us to be Christlike, if only we will give it a try.

I so we come to the Bible verse I especially have on my heart to commend to you two Confirmands, Lilas and Amanda. I am drawn to a verse in this morning’s Epistle reading, from Romans Chapter 8. The whole verse is a glorious and important one, but I am going to focus on but one part of the verse. It is a simple sentence easy to memorize. It is a simple idea that helps us to see the forest for the trees. It is a simple idea connecting you and the Holy Spirit. Here, then, is the Bible verse I commend to you on your Confirmation Day. It comes from Romans 8:26. I will read it for you, a phrase at a time, like waves going forward:

...the *Spirit* helps... (we have a *mighty* Helper, God himself!)

...the Spirit helps *us*... (not just St. Francis, not just Mother Teresa, but also us!)

...the Spirit helps us *in our weakness*... (the Spirit helps not only the strong, not only the heroes, but also, and especially, the weak)

St. Paul illustrates this great teaching by speaking of prayer:

²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs

too deep for words. (Romans 8:28, NRS)

But what St. Paul says here about prayer is true for our entire spiritual life: We do not always know how to be good in this world, but think of Jesus, and go ahead and try your hand at living like him. What is true for prayer is true for our Christian life as a whole: We do not know how to pray as we ought, but we should give it our best effort in the confidence that the Spirit prays along with us and helps us. Likewise, in our spiritual life in this world: We do know exactly how to be Christ in this world. We stumble, we fail, we sometimes have wrong notions about Jesus -- notions that we will correct as we get older. But let us try to be like Christ -- really try, without deceiving ourselves or neglecting the effort: Let us try to be like Christ. It is not hopeless for us and we can do it. Why? Because we are not in this Christian life alone:

...the Spirit helps us in our weakness

If you two young women did not *want to be good*, if you did not want to be Christlike, I do not know what I could say to you on your Confirmation Day. But I know you. I know that you do want to bear the name of Jesus with honesty and you do want to contribute to this world in his name. You want to be people of love following his pattern. You want to bring some sweetness to this world. You want to approach the world with love in your hearts, whether it is a bank clerk on the other end of the telephone line, or a professor in high school or college, whether it is the one who will claim your heart someday, or the stranger on the sidewalk, or the sad person on the subway: you want to be a force for the good in our world. Indeed, you want to be little Christs!

And so, I want you to know that you can do it. Your brothers and sisters in the Lord here at Immanuel want you to have confidence that you can do it. The whole Church on earth and in heaven is cheering for you, believing that the goal is within your grasp.

And the reason it is within your grasp is your Confirmation verse: ...the Spirit helps us in our weakness. Our Gospel Lesson this morning refers to the Holy Spirit as your "Counselor":

²⁶But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me; (John 15:26, RSV)

Elsewhere the Spirit is referred to as our Comforter, our Intercessor, our Advocate. In all cases, it means the same thing: you are not alone as you seek to be Christlike. God himself will be with you. Indeed, that voice within your heart urging you onwards in love: that voice, you should believe, is so holy that

it is God himself speaking to you, guiding you, appealing to you to follow Jesus in your life. You have read the Bible, you have heard the sermons, you have a growing sense of who Jesus is: Go for it! Strive that high, that you should be a little Christ in this world.

And as you strive, know that the Spirit will be with you to help you in your weakness. Indeed, God will be at work in you to guide you into holiness of life and to accomplish his good purposes in you. It will be with you as St. Paul says:

For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:13, KJV)

And one day, this world will be struck by the beauty and holiness of your life and will want to be like you, as you strive to be like Him, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.